



TONY ABBOTT & JOHN INTERVIEW – Episode 2

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John Roskam:

Hello. My name is John Roskam. I'm the executive director of the Institute of Public Affairs. In this, the second of my three conversations with Tony Abbott about the Australian way of life, we discussed the protest movements sweeping the world and impacting upon Australia. We examined the success of Australian history and what it is that makes the Australian way of life so special.

Tony Abbott, it's great to be with you again. There's so many important things to discuss today. We're going to be talking about the Australian way of life, what it means, why it's so important. And it seems that it becomes more important as we think about what has just happened over the last couple of days and couple of weeks. I must admit, I never thought here in Australia, we would see a statue of you, a statue of John Howard, covered up in plastic and fenced off the way it has



been. That's completely un-Australian. What's happening at the moment?

Tony Abbott:

Well, John, I think there is a gathering assault on our culture more generally. Obviously what happened to George Floyd in the United States was abominable, absolutely abominable. But the idea that our history is the same, the idea that our police culture is the same, is just wrong. Now, I think the protesters are going too far in the United States, but here they're copycats dealing with different issues in a different country. And I don't like the copycat culture to start with, but I particularly think that it's out of place here. We've never had slavery in this country. Sure, we've had things that we wouldn't be too proud of, like the blackbirding and so on. But Governor Phillip was absolutely crystal clear in his agreement with the British government, before the first fleet set sail, that there can be no slavery in a free land and therefore no slaves. He was absolutely crystal clear. The Federation Fathers were absolutely crystal clear that there could never be slavery or anything remotely approaching it in this country. So look, I'm against copycats and I'm certainly against the denigration of culture.

John Roskam:

What do you think has given rise to this? And I think it's a nice description, copycat culture. It seems to have brought a whole series of things together. What's happened and why has it got so much attention? Because one of the things I'd like to talk to you about is the fact that the massive media attention given to these protests in Australia and around the world is so separate from the mainstream culture.

Tony Abbott:

It's interesting, John, if you go back to the 1970s, when you and I were at university, the claim then-

John Roskam:

I was 80's.

Tony Abbott:

Okay. All right.

John Roskam:

I was suffering from the campus revolts of the '70s to hit the '80s.

Tony Abbott:

You're pulling youth on me? Okay. But look-

John Roskam:

I was suffering your consequences.

Tony Abbott:

Go back to the seventies when I was at university and the plea for a fair go for women, blacks, gays, et cetera, was based on the absolutely fundamental understanding that everyone had to be



treated equally.

John Roskam:
Equal.

Tony Abbott:
That it was wrong by the best lights of our culture to treat people differently on the basis of their color, their gender, their sexuality-

John Roskam:
Their religion.

Tony Abbott:
Their religion. And what's happened now is that they do want to treat people equally based on precisely those things. The very concept that black lives matter is essentially exclusionary. Now of course black lives do matter, but all lives matter. And yet to say all lives matter means that you now get sacked as the editor of the newspaper, scrapped as the presenter of a radio program.

John Roskam:
[4:38] Does it say something about Australia and our search for grievance that, as you say, we have to take aspects of the American culture and society and history which are not ours and import this grievance into Australia to search for grievance?

Tony Abbott:
But again, John, a country which has not that many really existential struggles will find other things to argue about, other things to struggle over. Now, by any objective standards, the Western world generally, the world really generally, certainly countries like Australia, by any objective standards, notwithstanding the ups and downs of the moment, we have it pretty damned good. The technology, the wealth, the acceptance that people find, it's really wonderful by any historical standards, by our own standards of the past, by today's standards and other countries were doing so well. [5:51] But it is in human nature to be restless and discontented. It is in human nature to, I suppose, water create a them-and-us situation. And it's almost like what we're seeing now is a cry of rage against everything. Obviously there are particular instances in Australia's recent history where the best standards were not upheld-

John Roskam:
Every country's history.

Tony Abbott:
... but [6:25] this idea that there is something fundamentally wrong, something fundamentally illegitimate, something fundamentally racist about Australia in particular, but Western culture in general, it just does not stand up to serious scrutiny. I say to anyone who's unhappy with Australia, what country would you rather live in? Anyone who thinks that we are in some way racist, sexist, whatever, what country is better? And the truth is it's almost impossible to identify



one. And so I say to those people, let's work to make good better. Let's not try to destroy the good in the search for a mythical perfection [7:12], particularly when the perfection they are aspiring to is, I think, fundamentally misconceived [7:19] because we do not want to treat people differently-

John Roskam:

Should we take some responsibility... Sorry.

Tony Abbott:

... on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, et cetera.

John Roskam:

Should we take some responsibility for what's happened? You were always very clear about values and about Western civilization. We have a school curriculum that doesn't talk about those things, that disdains our civilization. We now have a university culture that completely disrespects, and more than that, attacks the notions of our culture that have given this notion of freedom and equality.

Tony Abbott:

Universities-

John Roskam:

Are we responsible for what has happened, to some extent?

Tony Abbott:

The ignorance of our history, the ignorance of our cultural underpinnings, I think we do have to take some responsibility for as a culture, as a society. I don't think that individual leaders of Australia, or indeed the collective leadership class, can really be blamed for active individual acts of vandalism. But the fact that so many people have very little understanding of the real facts of Australian history, the fact that so many people have almost zero knowledge of our cultural underpinnings, such as the New Testament for instance, is collectively a failing of Australia's leadership class.

John Roskam:

And you stood up for those values. When you've spoken about people knowing the Bible, you've been attacked for it.

Tony Abbott:

Yeah.

John Roskam:

Why are so many of... And let's call them the [elites 00:09:14]. Why are so many of the elites either refusing to engage in these discussions or saying they're unimportant or running away? Because when it comes to culture, when it comes to any aspect of life, you don't win many wars that you don't fight.

Tony Abbott:



All politicians are reluctant to engage in fights they might not be able to win.

John Roskam:

Now I'm going to pull you up on that. The left don't do that. So there's many aspects to what you've just said. Why is it that, let's say, politicians at the center right feel they are going to lose this debate? Because you've just alluded to the fact that they think they're going to lose. What's happened?

Tony Abbott:

Well, they think the tide is against them. They think swimming against the tide is impossible, therefore we just have to go with the flow. Now the problem is, and as a former politician who obviously had an eye to tomorrow's headline and next year's election, obviously you do not want to make unnecessary enemies. But on the other hand, there have got to be some things that are worth fighting for there have got to be some things that are worth losing for.

John Roskam:

The center left, or the progressive causes, or however you might wish to describe them, seem to have a more solid anchor than some of the center right. And just in the Western world.

Tony Abbott:

Well, go back to the times of Gough Whitlam. And Whitlam made the point that only the impotent are pure, and he was attacking his own side for being more interested in ideological purity than in winning elections. And again, there is nothing wrong with compromise, provided the true, the beautiful and the good is actually advanced by the compromise. If we can only take one step forward, let's surrender the second for the moment, but let's not take one step backward in the name of compromise and call that a good outcome.

John Roskam:

So you've talked about winning the elections. Is it the case that the center right have focused too much on winning elections or not winning the battle of ideas? Because if you were to look at the course of Australian history... You mentioned Gough Whitlam. Let's say back to '72. Who has won or who is winning the battle of ideas is a constant discussion and debate. Who is winning the battle of ideas?

Tony Abbott:

Well, at the moment, you'd have to say that the Orthodox Western position on a whole range of things that was taken for granted for decades is under challenge, and, I would argue, in retreat. Take a classic example, climate change. Now the science is not settled on climate change. It is absolutely not settled. And my view is that the best science is that carbon dioxide is just one of a range of factors influencing climate, that what man does is just one of many things impacting on climate. And in any event, as a matter of prudential judgment, I would say that you do not want to reduce carbon dioxide with such single-minded ferocity that it damages numerous other important objectives, such as greater prosperity, more jobs, the economic development of the country and so on.

But we are very reluctant, we of the center right, to take this on. I was told time and time again, look, you can't argue the science. Well, the scientists argue the science and why can't we say-

John Roskam:

We've seen this with the coronavirus.

Tony Abbott:

Why can't we say-

John Roskam:

There's no such thing as the science.

Tony Abbott:

Why can't we say that sure, we support the science, but the science is far from settled.

John Roskam:

You've mentioned sensible balance. How do we restore that sensible balance? I mean, I would argue that mainstream Australians maintain a sensible balance. But how has it been that on a range of issues, a noisy, loud, unreasonable tolerant minority of the community, one or two or three percent, seem to put out of balance all the rest of us?

Tony Abbott:

John, I think one of the problems that we've had in countries like Australia is that the good guys-

John Roskam:

Are no longer in Parliament.

Tony Abbott:

Well, there may be that, but the good guys love to be polite. We have a natural aversion to saying things that we know others will take great offense to. And even if-



John Roskam:

And we have a natural aversion to smashing windows and spray painting monuments.

Tony Abbott:

Absolutely right. But when someone says that they are doing this because of the terrible injustices that have been committed against them or their kind, we have a natural aversion to saying, "Well, actually when you examine these injustices, they're not nearly what you claim them to be, or if they were, they're not now, or if they are now, even, this is not the way to go about fixing it." So we are a bit conflict-averse, and that's not a bad thing, but only up to a point. Some conflicts cannot be avoided. Some fights have to be had.

John Roskam:

How is it that the political elites, the administrative elites, the business elites had become so removed from mainstream values?

Tony Abbott:

Well, part of the problem is that all of us have become collectively less versed in our history. All of us have become collectively less convinced in our faith. And so in one sense, the business leaders are simply a reflection of the cultural weakening of these times. But there are the factors at work as well, and I would argue that compulsory superannuation has been a key element in the weakening of the business community's commitment to economic reform. When you've got union super funds controlling, large swathes of a public company's capital, and influencing or determining who are the directors of those public companies, influencing or determining who take on many of the management roles, the corporate affairs, the government relations positions in these companies. When you invite people into capitalism who don't really believe in capitalism, is it any wonder that capitalism loses faith in itself?

John Roskam:

So what's the future of capitalism? We'll go to the big topics. What's the future of capitalism, when capitalists are losing faith in the system?

Tony Abbott:

Well, in the end, capitalism will survive because capitalism works in a way that socialism doesn't, but we may have to go through a bad period before people wake up to the problem.

John Roskam:

One of the things that has been commented upon overseas is that mobs have taken democracy upon themselves. And it's of course, it's not democracy. If a statute, for example, is to be removed, and we'll take that as an example, that is for the democratically elected town council, the national government. But when did we-



Tony Abbott:

Mobs to not be allowed to take the law into their own hands? They absolutely should not.

John Roskam:

And when did we allow that to happen?

Tony Abbott:

Well, again, the police should not have stood by while that statue of Colston was toppled in Bristol. The police should not have stood by while hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of protesters breached the social distancing rules. Regardless of what you think of the social distancing rules-

John Roskam:

It's one rule for-

Tony Abbott:

... they either apply to everyone or they apply to no one.

John Roskam:

Exactly. And for Australians, this double standard is so frustrating. And then you first had the double standard and then you had the frustration of no politician calling out the double... Labor or Liberal. It didn't matter. No politician called that out.

Tony Abbott:

Look, this is one of the reasons why we are, I think, drifting to some extent, because the people whose job it is to tell us the truth and give us a lead are not being as clear and as forthright as they should be.

John Roskam:

We've spoken a lot, and Australians have spoken a lot, about the need for concrete reform proposals to improve the economy, concrete proposals from business. I want to draw this conversation to an end gradually by asking you, what are the concrete proposals for cultural reform so that we understand our freedoms, we understand Australia is the best country in the world. So how do we start putting these aspects on the maps? So of course, the IPA, for example, has done a lot of work on school curriculum, on the role of universities, our understanding of our freedom through foundations of Western civilization program and our work with young people. What are some of the building blocks to that cultural reform agenda? And I even hesitate to call it cultural reform agenda because culture is not what the state imposes. It is what we build as a community, but it might rely upon aspects of the government, of our cultural institutions, to rebuild that if it can be rebuilt.

Tony Abbott:

Yeah. Well, John, in my view, [20:18] everyone has got to understand our history more and better, and everyone has got to be familiar with the broad Western canon, particularly what might be thought of as its Australian variant. If you don't understand the things that have shaped the culture



in which you live, it's very hard to navigate properly. If you don't know the past, how can you possibly make sense of the present and build a better future? [20:53]

And again, the sheer ignorance... The IPA did some work a couple of years back on millennials and pointed out that less than 50% of millennials, I think it was, had any real idea of what the 26th of January commemorated. Something like 58% of millennials thought that capitalism had failed. Something like 65% of them had a positive view of socialism. And that's because 51% of them had never heard of Mao, and 42% of them had never heard of Lenin. So look, you've got to start with the foundation stones and the foundation stones of cultural literacy if you are living in a country like ours. An awareness of the great books, and the Bible is the greatest book of all. I'm not saying you've got to have religious faith, but you've got to have a certain amount of religious knowledge.

And then there's the history. One of the best biographies of the last few years was the Andrew Roberts biography of Churchill. And one of the many instructive points that he makes is that Churchill's speeches to the British people during the Second World War were peppered with references to our long island story because everyone knew it. Everyone knew it back then. Almost no one knows it now. One of the guys I served with in the Davidson Fire Brigade is a pommie migrant who was in the British army. He would be in his late thirties. And he said, "Look, the history we were taught in British schools 20 years ago was this litany of racist exploitation. That was the story of Britain that we were getting from our schools."

John Roskam:

He could understand [crosstalk 00:23:00].

Tony Abbott:

Now this person was sufficiently resistant to all of that to join the British Army and serve for a number of years. And he's a person of, I think, decent, pretty middle-of-the-road values now. But if people are constantly bombarded with this self-hatred in their formative years, and when their parents feel intellectually ill-equipped to counter it, when their peers rarely have the self-confidence to question it, is it any wonder that doubt is everywhere?

John Roskam:

And in our next conversation, we're going to talk about how to build that confidence and how we restore the idea of mainstream Australian values to the center of our public debate. Tony, thank you so much.

Tony Abbott:

Thanks, John. Good to talk.